

## U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Christopher Hill Interviewed on PBS' "The Charlie Rose Show"

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ROSE:

The mission in Iraq is shifting from a military role to a civilian role. Last month, U.S. combat troops withdrew from Iraqi cities. All U.S. forces are expected to leave the country by the end of 2011.

A series of high-profile bombing that raised questions about the readiness of the Iraqi security forces, and the government of Prime Minister Maliki is under pressure to pass the hydrocarbon law and to speed up its national reconciliation process.

Joining me now from Washington is Ambassador Christopher Hill. He is the new U.S. ambassador to Iraq. He was formerly assistant secretary of state and the lead negotiator in the six party talks to end North Korea's nuclear program.

I am pleased to have him back on this broadcast, the first time since he went to Baghdad as ambassador. Thank you for joining us.

HILL:

Thank you.

ROSE:

So tell me how this is working out, the withdrawal of American troops to these bases outside of Baghdad.

HILL:

First of all, I think it's working pretty well. This was on the basis of a security agreement that was reached in the latter part of last year with the Bush administration.

So, the dates for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the cities and for the eventual withdrawal from U.S. forces in 2011, all those dates were approved by Bush administration.

So, what we're trying to do is implement this. And we're turning over to the Iraqis some key responsibilities in their cities.

And, you know, it's tough because you're turning over from a -- the world's greatest fighting force, the United States, over to the Iraqis, who are certainly aspiring to do things right. But it's not going to be easy, but I think it's going well.

ROSE:

Are the Iraqis of mixed minds about this? They want to see the United States go, and at the same time they're worried that they may not be ready?

HILL:

Oh, I think there's an element of that, because I the Iraqis are concerned about is security, and we have spent a lot of time trying to train up these Iraqi forces, work closely with them, make sure they react to situations the way we do, and overall try to deal with the security.

But meanwhile, the various insurgent groups, they want to somehow humiliate the Iraqi forces, prove that they were incapable of doing it, and then that would give rise to the recreation militias as they had a few years ago.

So, the Iraqi forces have a lot of pressure on them.

But I do believe the people want to see their own forces there. I do believe that Iraqis, although they -- they don't -- they want to see us sort of nearby, but I do believe they want to see some progress in having the Iraqis really run their own security.

ROSE:

What is your role?

HILL:

Well, my role is really to signal to the Iraqi people that the United States is not leaving. I mean, we're going to have a very serious, a very long-term relationship with Iraq.

But it's not going to be a military relationship. It's going to be a civilian relationship as we have with numerous countries around the world. We're going to have exchange programs and education. We're going to have scientific programs, agriculture things. We're going to have a lot of different things.

And what the Iraqi people need to do is understand that even though our forces are leaving, we as civilians are not going to leave. We're going to have a very productive relationship.

ROSE:

At what time will you reach out to American businesses and say "Come invest in Iraq"?

HILL:

Well, we're doing that.

But the Iraqis have got to do a few things themselves. For example, they've got to sort of clean up some of the macroeconomic environment there. They've got to look at the question of subsidies, things like this.

Some of these actually predated Saddam. They were from sort of an Arab socialist time. And whereas, you know, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union are all gone and very much changed, in Iraq, there are a lot of very bad economic habits from a long time ago.

And I think foreign firms looking there, they first have to look at security, which is obviously getting better by the day, but they also have to look at whether this is a country that is really set up to play by international rules. And that's something else we're working with the Iraqis on.

ROSE:

Why can't they pass a hydrocarbon law?

HILL:

Well, you know, people say, "This is a hydrocarbon law; it's just about oil." Well, it's about oil the way "Moby Dick" is a story about a whale. I mean, there's a lot more going on here. It really has to do with the relationship of the center, Baghdad, to the -- to one of the federal entities of Iraq, namely Kurdistan.

It has to do with how you share the proceeds of it, of the oil. It has to do with how you organize yourself for the oil. Do you have a national ministry? Do you have a national oil company?

And when you start looking at questions like that, you get into a lot of patronage issues, you know, how are these things going to be staffed? It goes into the question of which oil fields do you try to invite foreign businesses in to exploit first?

So, there are a lot of different things, and it's proven to be difficult to get this hydrocarbons law done.

And plus, I should add, we have elections in the Kurdish regions coming up just next week from now, that is, July 25. And also there will be national elections in Iraq.

And as we even know from our own experience, sometimes it's tough to come through with good legislation with an election looming.

ROSE:

Some speculation that the relationship with the Kurds is at a very, very tinderbox level.

HILL:

Well, I think the relationship with the Kurds is a complex relationship. I think some of the statements that we've heard out of you Erbil, that is, the capital of the Kurdistan area, some of those statements are not helpful.

But I think they need to be understood in the context of an election that's coming up just next week in the Kurdish regional government area.

So, I don't think we need to get too worried about those statements. I think what we need to worry about are some other things.

For example, there's internal boundary question, that is, where does this Kurdish area end and where do the -- does the rest of the country pick up? That is, where are the Arab areas versus the Kurdish areas?

There's a U.N. process to set up to mediate this. But, you know, you're dealing with some very hard-headed people on all sides of the equation. So it's not easy for the U.N.

And I think what the United States needs to do is to be very active here, but maybe not in the lead role. Let's see how the U.N. can work this through.

There's something like 14 different disputes along this line. Anyone who's worked on Bosnia or places like that understands how this works, and there's no real wholesale approach to it.

You've got to do it retail. You've got to go through each of these 14 areas and see what the local communities are concerned about -- is it security? Is it that they don't like to see Kurdish forces in their areas or don't like to see national central police forces in their area?

So, you've got to work this stuff. It takes time. I think we got the right process for it. But it's really going to take some time.

ROSE:

And so what about the relationship between the Sunnis and the Shia, the kind of sectarian warfare that ignited back in 2005 and '06?

HILL:

Well, you know, those were terrible times when you had some 3,000 people being killed weekly. Since those times, it's been a lot better. But it is still not easy, and you have to work on the sort of reconciliation process every day.

Now, this is something that the Iraqis need to do, but it's something that we need to taken a interest in, which is not to mean the U.S. should say We will solve your sectarian problems for you. But we can't just say, hey, these are your problems, leave us out of them. We've got to be engaged in a helpful way, and that's what we're trying to do.

Now, the good news, if you look at the Iraqi politicians as they're getting ready for these January elections, they're looking at what sort of coalition do we need to win this election?

And what you're seeing more and more of is the Shiite, who are a -- the majority of the people in Iraq, but still they can't win an election with just a pan-Shiite coalition. They need to reach out and get a Kurdish partner and get a Sunni partner.

And I think that's kind of a good sign that they -- all the major players realize they need partners from the Sunni and the Kurds.

So, there's a tendency in the sort of politics of this to try to reach out and get some votes from the other side. And that's, that's a good sign.

ROSE:

What is Prime Minister Maliki seeking in Washington?

HILL:

Well, he's going to have a couple days. He's seeing some very senior people here, starting, of course, with our president.

He's got an interest in showing that he's managing this U.S. relationship. He's got an interest in showing that even after the security agreement we're going to have this civilian relationship, and the civilian relationship is going to be important for the Iraqi people.

The other day in Baghdad I hosted a reception, a diplomatic reception in the middle of Baghdad for Iraqis who have studied in the U.S. In fact, there was one woman there who had studied in 1952 at Columbia University.

And it really sort of highlights the fact that we've had these education exchanges for many years, but it was interrupted by this very bleak and terrible period of Saddam Hussein. And now we're trying to rekindle that. And I think the president wants to show that all these things are forward.

And these things that I say are going forward, things like scientific exchanges, et cetera, it's all put together in something called a "strategic framework agreement" which was a sort of companion piece to the security agreement, the security agreement being the thing under which the U.S. forces are going to be leaving.

So, I think Maliki wants to show that indeed there's a civilian side to this relationship. It's a civilian side that's very important to the Iraqi people.

There's one other thing that he'll be doing. He's going to be going to Arlington Cemetery, and he's going to be paying his respects to the many thousands of American soldiers who've died there. And I, for one don't think that's a very good idea.

ROSE:

Do that you believe the majority of people in Iraq are glad that we came?

HILL:

I do, I do. I was down in...

ROSE:

What's your evidence?

HILL:

Well, you know, first of all, polling data shows that a majority support -- have supported our presence.

But, you know, more sort of focus groups, if you will. I was down at a place called Nasiriya the other day, and I was meeting with students from a university called Dhi Qar University, which is the name of the province. And the thirst and the hunger they have for more American involvement.

I mean, they're asking me about -- some of the kids were from law school, and they're asking me, can we get some American lawyers down, talk to us about the U.S. legal system. We have a lot of lawyers, but usually we're dealing with Iraqi judges and ministry types.

But we haven't actually reached out to students. And the desire of these law students to sort of see and touch Americans was really quite compelling.

Same with these kids who are learning English, you know. They have never talked to an American, to a native speaker of English. And so they just wanted to get more from us.

And I was very pleased that within days of my trip there we were able to send some people to begin this relationship with a small university.

And, you know, when you talk about contact, when you talk about reaching out to people, again, you've got to do it one person at a time, one mayor at a time, one student at a time. It's really -- you know, it takes time. But we're going to get there.

ROSE:

Is Ayatollah Sistani playing a positive role?

HILL:

He is, he is. He is a very revered Shia cleric who has essentially -- during the whole issue of American troops as they were negotiating the so-called security agreement, he was the one who said American troops should be treated like guests.

And anyone knows who know about Arab society knows guests is the most exalted position. I mean, being a guest, it's not like your mother-in-law staying with you. It's a real guest. And so everyone knows that that means lay off the troops.

You know, this has been a tough situation. You know, the Shia, who are by far the largest majority in Iraq, there are virtually no Shia majority states in the Middle East. So they're looking out at a Sunni Kuwait, at Sunni Saudi Arabia, Sunni Syria. I mean, these states that have never had a Shia leadership. So Iraq is...

ROSE:

How about Iran?

HILL:

Well, there's the issue. The only other Shia majority and Shia-run state in the Middle East right now is Iran. And so what we don't want is a situation where the Iraqis feel somehow that that's the only country that will be supporting them.

Now, frankly, the Iranians play a very negative role in Iraq, and they have not been respecting their sovereignty. And, frankly, when you look at some of the violence in the southern part of the country, I think you could put your finger on a very malevolent influence from the Iranians.

ROSE:

Why are they doing that? What do they hope to gain?

HILL:

Well, you know, the trouble with the Middle East is everyone thinks everyone else belongs to them. And I think the Iranians feel that somehow if you look through the history of Persia, you see that Iraq was, or a good part of Iraq was under Persia. And they look at the fact that it's Shia.

And they really think that somehow Iraq should be a subservient state. That is, they're not respecting their sovereignty.

And certainly what the Iranians fear about Iraq is Iraq's democracy. Now, lord knows, it's not a perfect democracy. It's got a long way to go. But let me tell you, the Iraqis at least can run an election.

So I think the Iranians have a lot to be concerned about from Iraq's side. And, of course, the Iranians are very much worried about their own internal problems.

ROSE:

I assume we've communicated to them to stop it, aren't we?

HILL:

I think the Iranians are very well aware of our concerns about this malevolent influence.

ROSE:

I mean, I assume General Petraeus told them, actually -- stop it.



HILL:

I don't want to confirm any individual discussions. But I can assure you the Iranians have been made well aware of our concerns. You know, in my backyard...

ROSE:

What are the consequences if they don't stop?

HILL:

Well, I mean, you know, the Iran wants a better relationship with us, with the world, there are a few things they've got to do, starting with the nuclear program. But also they've got to, I think play a more constructive role in Iraq.

You know, Iran and Iraq need to have a good relationship in the long run, but it's got to be based on mutual respect.

And when those of us who live in the green zone occasionally get these 107 millimeter rockets coming in, in some cases coming right into where we live, and they're all made in Iran, we would sort of like to see the Iranians do something about that.

ROSE:

Speaking of that, you almost got killed the other day. How close was it?

HILL:

Well, you know, I was in a motorcade. We had six vehicles, and, unfortunately, someone set off a roadside bomb, and, fortunately, we were all OK and we drove through the smoke and went on about our business.

ROSE:

Were you targeted for that? Were you targeted, or did they simply want to kill some Americans, and they saw this motorcade, and they said, "Here goes, let's get this one"?

HILL:

Hard -- it's really hard to say, Charlie. I know there's an ongoing investigation, things happen.

All I can say is I've got some of the best security people in the world. They follow the best practices in the world. And, you know, driving over to the studio about a half hour ago, some car cut in front of my taxi, and I saw my whole life go before my eyes.

So, you know, stuff happens.

(LAUGHTER)

ROSE:

Wait a minute. Are you saying it's worse in Washington than Baghdad? Is that what you said?

HILL:

It depends who's driving.

(LAUGHTER)

But I will say, some very bad things continue to happen in Iraq. And all I can say is we've got some really talented people dedicated to dealing with it, so much so that we're not curtailing what we do. In fact, we're getting out there and meeting Iraqis and trying to make it a better place.

ROSE:

A couple of last questions.

One, Muqtada al-Sadr -- what's the status of his own efforts to be the collaborator, either participate and be part of the solution or be part of the problem?

HILL:

He hasn't -- I can't say he's been doing much participating. And, in fact, the Sadrists, as they're called, have not been very helpful in the parliament there.

So, I think he's got a ways to go before he's a full participant. On the other hand, he just spent about a year or so studying to be promoted in the system of Shiite clerics. So maybe he was able to pick up some things in school there.

This is a guy who really has not embraced a system that other people have embraced. And what we are trying to do, and, indeed, what the Iraqis are trying to do is to get more and more groups to embrace politics and put down their 107 millimeter rockets.

And there's been a lot of success, a lot of hard work on this, and certainly a lot of the groups that were in the Sadrist camp are very much in the political side now. The problem is they're not being all that constructive yet.

ROSE:

And have the Sunnis, who were part of the awakening, been absorbed into the government, and are they being met with open arms?

HILL:

Yes, you know, that's been going well. These are -- we're talking about Sunni tribes in Anbar province, who tend to be very sort of rural type of Sunnis. And a lot of the militias that were part of this Sunni insurgency have actually switched sides and, of course, they're very much opposed to Al Qaida, and who wouldn't, because Al Qaida is simply out to kill people and they don't really seem to care who.

So I think the so-called "awakening" movement that you mentioned, but also these militias who've been brought in and paid for by the government, that's going pretty well.

I mean, it's not perfect. We sometimes hear that such and such a unit didn't get their pay last month.

ROSE:

Or were shot, or were shot.

HILL:

Or were shot, yes, yes. You know, this is a place with people pick up a gun pretty quickly, and where there's a lot of violence on a given day.

But, again, you have to look at the trends. You have to look at what it was like a year ago, what it was like a month ago. And I think overall the trends are in the right direction.

ROSE:

There were reports that there was some tension between American military leadership and Iraqi military leadership, and that the Americans were very concerned because the Iraqis said you can't leave the base until we tell you so.

HILL:

Well, yes. I've seen these reports. There are a couple of newspaper stories about them.

You know, I'm sure some of these things have happened. But I can tell you, one thing that's very clear in the security agreement that we reached with the Iraqis at the end of last year, the Bush administration reached with the Iraqis, which is our guys have a right to defend themselves. And they will defend themselves, and no one can tell them they can't.

So, I'm not saying that there won't be disagreements, but we have worked very hard with the Iraqis, we've worked very hard to have a common operations center. We've worked very hard to have transparencies so they know when we see a threat the Iraqis see the same threat. We've worked very hard on sort of meshing this.

And it's not easy, and I'm not saying there aren't problems and there won't be additional problems. But, again, I think it's in the right direction, and the fact that the troops are out of the cities is a very good sign, a good sign for Iraq's ability to take over their own security, and a good sign for our troops to come home and come home with a sense of a mission well done.

So, I think we're going to keep working this. And I'm not saying we aren't going to have a problem next Tuesday, or something like that. But we're going to keep at it.

ROSE:

And what happens if in this election next years there a referendum, and the referendum voted by the Iraqi citizens says "We want the Americans out of here by the end of 2010, not 2011"?

HILL:

Well, actually, according to the security agreement, they can have a referendum, but they would have to notify us within a year, and then a year later we would be out.

So, if they had the referendum, and the best that could happen, really, is -- I mean, for people voting for that referendum is that we would be out when we said we're going to be out.

So, I don't think we have a problem now on the referendum. I think we're here according to security agreement.

I think one thing that was very important for the Iraqis is will the Americans do what they said they'll do? And what was very important for us is to show the Iraqis yes, indeed, we will. You want us out of Baghdad, we've agreed to be out of Baghdad, we're out of Baghdad.

So, I think that made a deep impression in Iraqi society, a very positive impression of our willingness to work with them as a sovereign and our willingness to show them this kind of respect.

ROSE:

So, you're convinced that the vast majority of Iraqis believe the United States is not there to stay and the United States is not there to take their oil?

HILL:

You know, if you look at opinion surveys, there are Iraqis who believe that. But all we can do is to amass clear facts which will demonstrate the contrary.

And I think increasingly, and, in fact, if you look at some of the recent opinions surveys, more Iraqis believe that we are not planning to stay as a result of our moving on June 30.

So, I think it is a process that is convincing Iraqis of our good intentions.

ROSE:

When we say "move out," we're really talking about military forces, aren't we?

HILL:

Yes, we're talking about - actually, we're talking about Baghdad and Mosul.

ROSE:

Right.

HILL:

The other areas -- we had already moved out of the urban areas. So, people talk about June 30, but it wasn't something where you were seeing hundreds of tanks moving around. It was remaining forces in Baghdad or remaining forces in Mosul.

Now, those are two of the toughest areas. You know, Baghdad is enormous, and there are a lot of different group there. And Mosul, as you know, is on that fault line between the Kurdish lands and the Sunni-Arab lands. So, these are tough areas.

But we did move out. The Iraqi security forces have set up their own checkpoints and doing their own patrolling. And believe me, they've been taking some hits, they've been taking some casualties. It hasn't been easy at all for them.

But, you know, they're going to learn. They're going to do a better job. And I think they can handle the chore.

And the reason I think they can handle the chore is, you know, the world's greatest fighting force, the U.S. military, is also turning out to be the world's greatest trainers. And we have worked so hard with these guys, and I think it's going to be OK.

ROSE:

Finally this. Tom Friedman wrote a column the other day, and he said "The big question for Iraq is, what kind of country do they want to be?" I'm sure you saw that. And how would you answer that?

HILL:

Yes, I heard he was in country. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to get to Baghdad or down to Nasiriyah where I was that day, so I wasn't able to talk to him at all.

But, you know, I think the Iraqis do need to decide what they want to be.

You know, there's a lot of talk about the Kurds and whether they want to stay. But, you know, frankly, the Kurds already have a very autonomous region in the north.

And then when you look in Baghdad, you know, who constitutes the Iraqi government? You may notice that the president of Iraq is a Kurd. You may notice that the foreign minister of Iraq is a Kurd. You may notice the deputy prime minister, the guy involved with a lot of this oil business, is a Kurd. So the Kurds are actually doing fairly well.

And I think what Iraq needs to do, needs to work through, is the idea that everybody needs to get a bit of a share of this whole process, so they can't have a situation where it's winner take all.

And so this is sometimes difficult. I know that Prime Minister Maliki in putting together a government has to have people in his government who are from a different party and may not say all those nice things about him when he's not in the room.

So, it's a tough kind of democracy to put together, but I think that's what they want, and we're hopeful they'll have the tools to achieve it.

I'll make one other point that Iraq had a -- they had some bids on some oil fields, and one of the main oil fields there went to a consortium of British Petroleum and a Chinese company.

And if that works, Iraq is going to be able to double their current oil production, probably as much as double. And if they're able to do the remaining oil fields, they are going to be on a par, maybe not up to Saudi Arabia, but they're going to be moving up the line in terms of a country producing oil.

And that gives them some real possibilities to pay for services that their citizens need and to really kind of work on things.

But the Iraqis have had a problem over the years, indeed, over the centuries, of being isolated. And so this time they've got to figure out how to reach some of those Sunni neighbors, work with them, and then reach out to the world, have good relations with Europe, good relations with us.

And I think if they can achieve this kind of internationalization, they could have a very positive -- they could be a very positive entity smack dab in the Middle East. I think all politics should start with a map. And if you look at a map there, Iraq is right in the center.

ROSE:

Are you convinced it was the right thing to do to invade Iraq?

HILL:

Well, Charlie, I've got a lot of views on that, but I'm not sure any of them is really relevant right now.

What I'm trying to do is make sure our relationship becomes civilianized and make sure that our troops are able to leave on the schedule that we've agreed. And I do believe that is -- that we are on schedule. And I'll let historians decide whether this was the right thing to do.

ROSE:

North Korea -- what can you tell us about the son who might be the next president of North Korea?

HILL:

Well, you know, I don't do that account right now. I've passed the station wagon and moved on. But...

ROSE:

I'm not doing very good at getting you to tell me anything.

HILL:

But I can tell you that what is going on in North Korea is they have a domestic problem, a succession problem. They have Kim Jong-il, who's definitely not Kim Jong-well, these days. He's Kim Jong-very ill.

And they're now trying to do is deal with a very tough succession, because he didn't make any plans for it.

And so we have this kind of odd situation of a sort of monarchy in a communist country that, frankly, isn't working.

And I think the most important thing we have done and continue to do is to work with our partners. We are really flying in formation with the South Koreans, which I think is critical to the solution. We are working closely with the Chinese, and, of course, with the Japanese.

So, I'm kind of hopeful that we've got the right policy, and I'm hopeful that when the North Koreans get through, if they get through this, they will see that we are unified and they're going to have to deal with us.

ROSE:

Mr. Ambassador, thank you very much. It's a pleasure to see you again and to have you on this program, and hopefully next time in New York.

HILL:

Thank you very much.

ROSE:

Or Baghdad.



HILL:

OK, any time. Love to see you there.

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## List of Speakers

U.S. AMBASSADOR TO IRAQ CHRISTOPHER HILL

CHARLIE ROSE, HOST

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